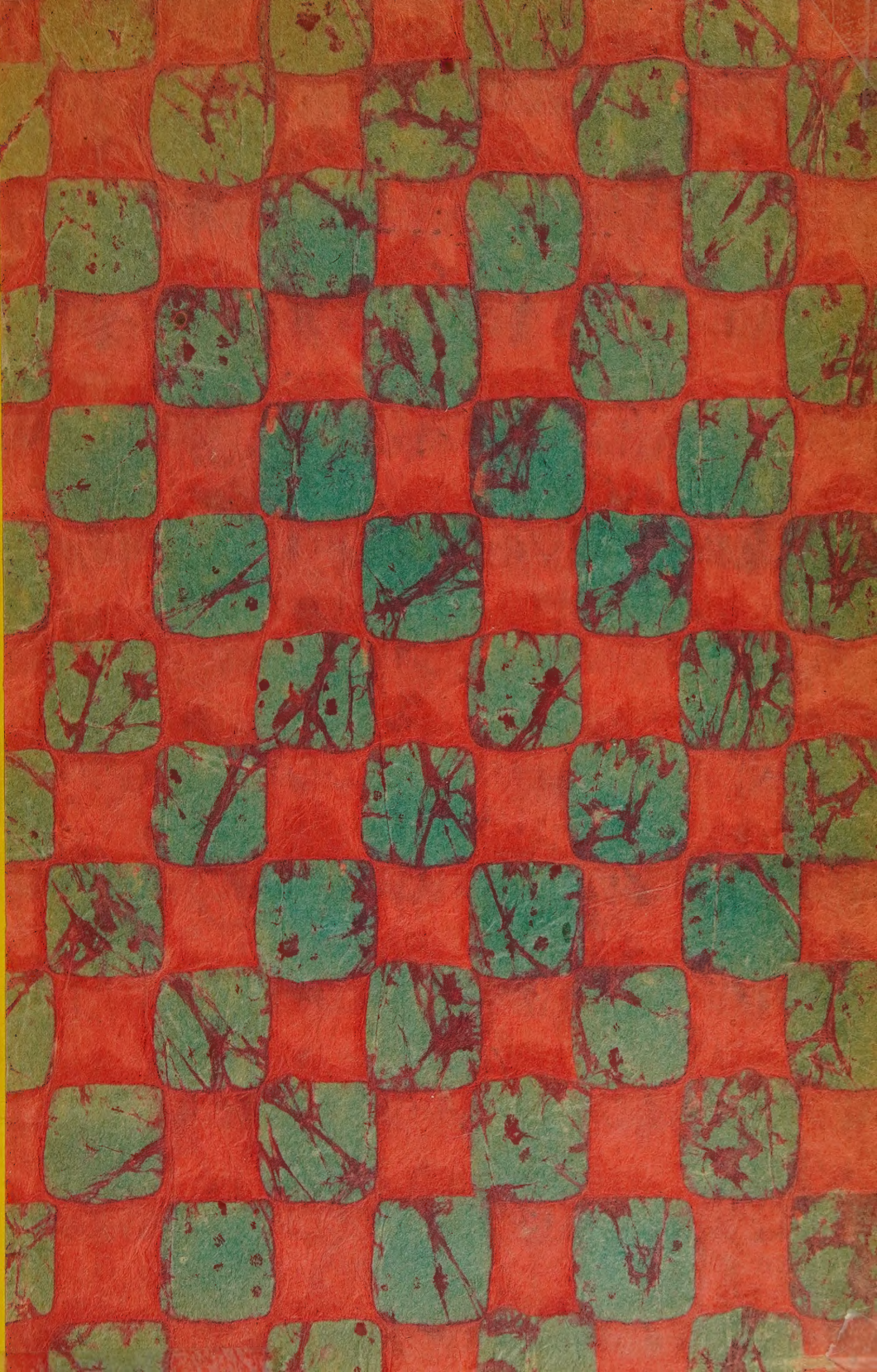

Mary O'Brien

R Castañeda
11. 1991

THE PRINCE OF WALES
AND OTHER FAMOUS AMERICANS

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COVARRUBIAS

THE PRINCE OF WALES
AND OTHER FAMOUS AMERICANS

BY MIGUEL COVARRUBIAS

WITH A PREFACE BY
CARL VAN VECHTEN

NEW YORK · ALFRED · A · KNOPF · MCMXXV

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PREFACE

On September 12, 1923—as this was the birthday of both Alfred Knopf and Henry Mencken, I readily recall the date—my friend Sherrill Schell hailed me on the telephone to request me to examine some drawings by a Mexican boy who had recently arrived in New York. "He has nothing to show editors but caricatures of Mexicans, unknown here. If you like his designs, I thought perhaps you might introduce him to some New York subjects." Now any person in public life is the object of at least one such appeal every week of his career, and it is usually a waste of time to listen to it. Usually, as a matter of fact, one does not listen. In this instance, however, whether by chance, or whether because Sherrill Schell had never before asked me to do anything for himself or anybody else, I bade him bring the young man to my apartment that afternoon at five.

Schell arrived at the appointed hour, accompanied by what appeared to be a youth just out of the adolescent stage, so shy, indeed, that he immediately began to bombard me with a volley of quite unrecognizable English. Neverthe-

less, I was able to pick out a few words, enough to gather that he had recently been stopping somewhere in Mexico with Witter Bynner and D. H. Lawrence. "Why," I demanded, "didn't you draw them?" His abashment was complete: he confessed that he was unaware that these fellows were celebrated!

I gently tugged at the portfolio that Miguel Covarrubias hugged under his arm, which, in his modesty, he had not voluntarily relinquished, and proceeded to scan the contents. Although I found myself ignorant of the very names of the subjects, with the single exception of Ramón del Valle-Inclan (and I had no idea what he looked like), I was immediately convinced that I stood in the presence of an amazing talent, if not, indeed, genius. That afternoon he made the sketches for his caricature of me, delivered two days later, the first, I think, of this New York series. That afternoon, too, I began to use the telephone in his behalf, and for the next few days I made appointments for him to meet H. L. Mencken, Waldo Frank, Avery Hopwood, Eva Le Gallienne, and a great many others. I also introduced him to Ralph Barton who, with unselfish admiration for the rare gifts of this rival caricaturist, rendered him invaluable aid and encouragement. As soon as Covarrubias had drawn a few local faces I invited him to join me one day for lunch at the Algonquin where he was acclaimed at once, held, in-

deed, almost a reception. From that moment he was launched—as I knew he would be: one glance at his drawings sufficed to exhibit indelible proof of his prowess.

From the beginning I was amazed at his ability to size up a person on a blank sheet of paper at once: there was a certain clairvoyance in this. I had believed, hitherto, that it was necessary for a caricaturist to study his subject for some time before he touched pen to paper. Covarrubias, at least so far as his own work was concerned, effectively demolished this belief. Speaking English imperfectly, a newcomer to this country, frequently he was actually ignorant as to whether his model was actor, painter, or author. In spite of this handicap, or because of it, his caricatures almost invariably go deeply behind the mere sculptural formation of the face. They are often a complete criticism of a personality. Moreover, the artist does not depend on ridiculous collocations of figures or witty captions, in the manner of Max Beerbohm, for his effects. His arrangement of the lines of the face alone tells the story, occasionally, it must be admitted, a cruel story.

There is, of course, a sequel to this history of our first encounter a little more than a year ago. At the present moment, Miguel Covarrubias is about as well known in New York as it would be possible for any one to be. In fact, when I desire to meet any celebrated person nowadays, my

instinct suggests at once that Covarrubias is the man who can most easily manage the introduction. On the whole, therefore, I fancy it would be more appropriate for him to draw a frontispiece for a book of mine than for me to furnish this poor preface for this brilliant book of his. I think, in compensation, I'll ask him to do it!

CARL VAN VECHTEN.

New York.
March 17, 1925.

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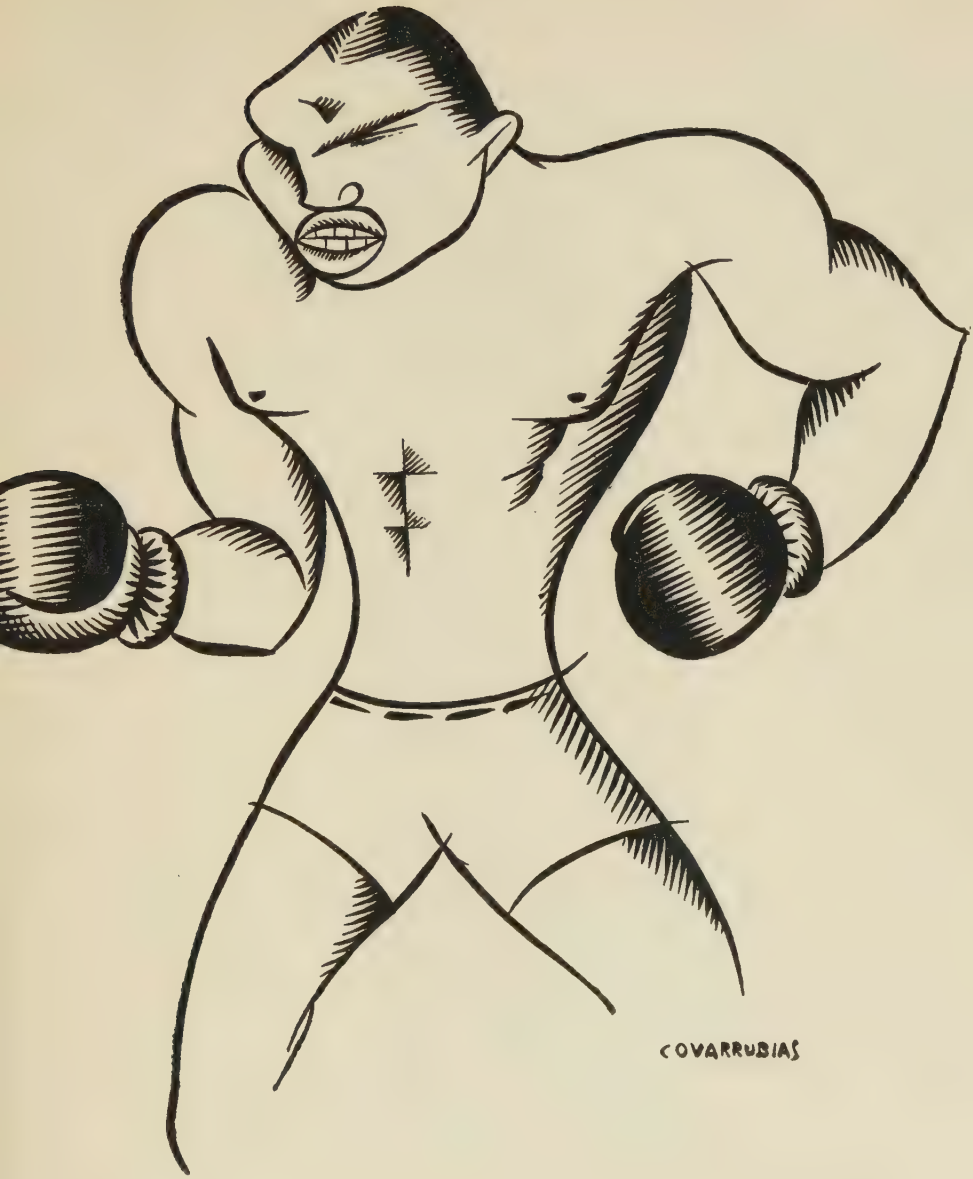
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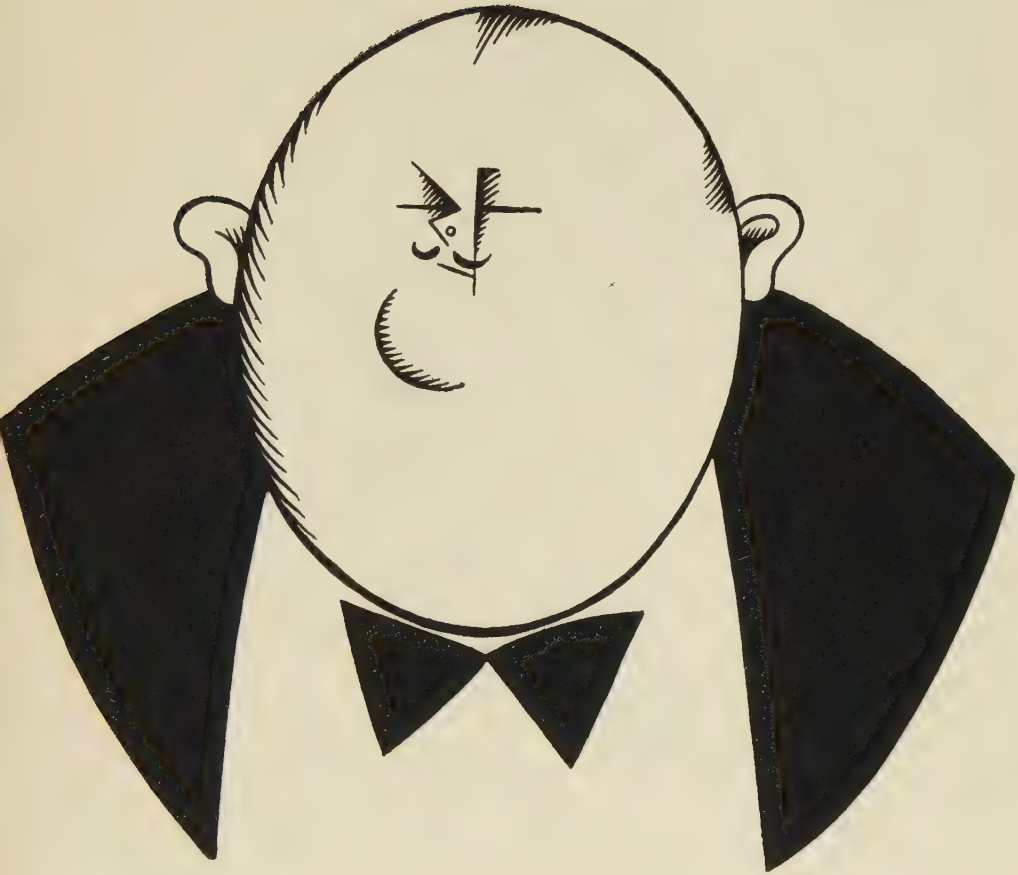

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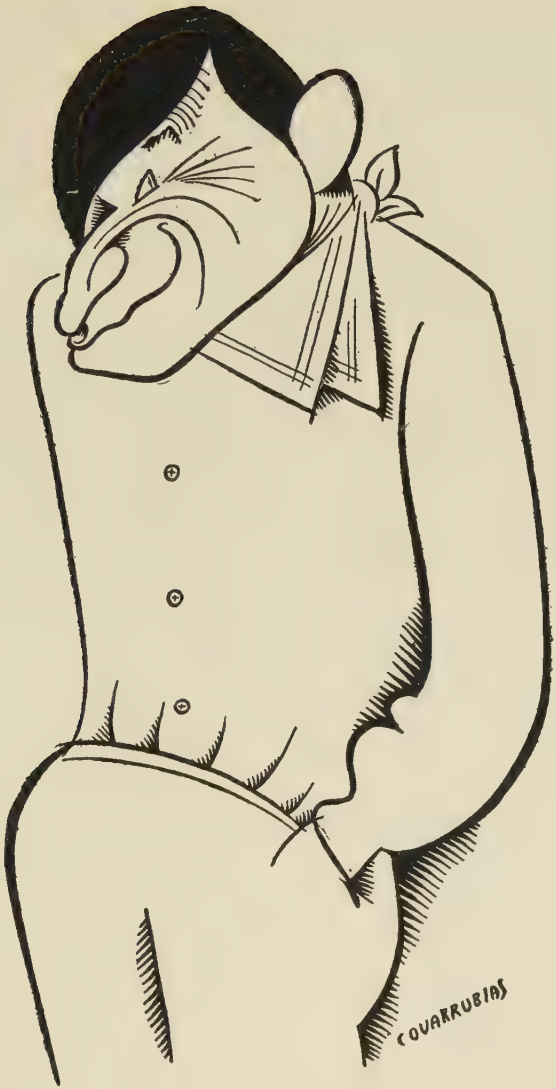
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